THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

April 5, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 53:1-6
Luke 17:22-25
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

"...God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,..."
-1 Corinthians 1:25 (NRSV)

In the play "Shadowlands" an actor in the role of the late C. S. Lewis, distinguished scholar, Oxford professor, popular author and lecturer, walks out onto the dark stage and addresses the audience:

> "Good evening. The subject of my talk tonight is love, pain and suffering."

After some clever banter about his being a bachelor and therefore more acquainted with suffering than love, Lewis says:

> "The question I will put to you this evening, and one which I will attempt to answer is this: If God loves us, why does He allow us to suffer so much?"

Lewis refers to the daily paper and a story about a runaway bus and death of eighteen children. Pointing an accusing finger upwards he asks:

> "Now, where was He? Why didn't He stop it? What possible point can there be to such a tragedy? Isn't God supposed to be good? Isn't God supposed to love us?"

Lewis then launches into a lecture on the topic in which he proposes that God sends us suffering to remind us that all is not well in the world and to make us lovable and loving. "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world," he says, and it is all very neat and academic and a bit too orderly.

But then Lewis falls in love. Or more accurately, a love which he didn't know was there, is called out of him by a woman, an American divorcee, Joy Davidson. They become friends. She and her son move to England after her marriage breaks up and as their friendship grows, Lewis agrees to marry her in order to satisfy immigration requirements, athough they remain just friends, very properly so.

And then suddenly Joy becomes gravely ill. She is going to die and Lewis discovers two things: one, he cares about her very much; and two, he is now vulnerable to an intensely personal, intensely painful suffering, which before Joy he knew only intellectually. So he marries her again, truly this time, in the hospital. Her illness subsides for a while. They have a bit of wonderful time together. And then she becomes ill again and dies.

Near the end of the play it is a very different C. S. Lewis. A clergy friend tries to comfort him.

> "We have to have faith that God knows."

Lewis responds in the rawness of grief and anger:

> "God knows. Yes, God knows. I don't doubt that. But does God care? Did God care about Joy?"
> [Shadowlands, William Nicholson]

It is important, I believe, to ask difficult questions in church, to think about difficult things together here. On this day - which in the long history of the Christian Church used to be known as Passion Sunday, nearing the end of Lent, two weeks before Easter - it is important to think about the central notion of our faith. Namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, who we believe was God's son, God's Christ, God's Incarnation, suffered, and died, and further that his suffering and dying were and are meaningful; were more than a tragedy, more than a terrible injustice; that his suffering and dying contain somehow God's love and God's power to make a difference in your life and mine.

There are a lot of reasons not to get into this whole business. We would prefer not to think about unpleasant topics. Life is full of enough grimness and suffering and tragedy. Religion ought to afford a respite, not more of the same. At least we're consistent. If there is one consistant dynamic in the New Testament it is Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death and his disciples' absolute refusal to deal with it or even think about it. They are willing to accept and believe what he says - up to this. They agree with what he says about the Kingdom of God, loving your enemies and forgiving seventy times seven. But they don't want to hear about suffering and death. "God forbid," Peter said about it.

So we are consistent about this matter. And yet the questions raised by suffering and death - his or anybody's for that matter - will not go away. My guess is that you ask them, momentarily at least, every time you read the newspaper - the morning summary of unnecessary suffering and tragedy - a dear little Theresa Ann Campo Pearson, born without a fully formed brain and the capacity for life, parents and grandparents standing around watching; a plane crash, an unexpected malignancy, one more AIDS death, twenty more people killed in the death throes of apartheid... And for a moment at least, until our propensity for self-protection moves us on to the sports page, we ask, every morning, over our second cup of coffee, "Why? Why, God? Is this really necessary?"

The philosophers have known that the greatest single argument against the existence of God is the existence of evil. And human beings have been thinking about it and struggling with it from the beginning of time.

The story of Job is the poetic expression of the question, "Why do innocent people suffer?" The accepted belief of the day was that innocent people do not suffer. Because God is just, suffering is the punishment for sin.

Job won't agree to that, and so, remarkably, in the Bible itself, is an eloquent struggle between a man and his conscience and his God around this matter of innocent suffering.

Archibald MacLeish framed the question and the Job story in a contemporary setting in the Pulitzer prize-winning play, "J.B." In that drama, Satan and God, two aging circus vendors, are discussing the old dilemma and Satan, or Nickles, says:

> "If God is God He is not good,
> If God is good He is not God."

That's the issue isn't it? How can a God who is good cause, or allow to happen, so many things that are not good? In his best selling memoir, Growing Up, Russell Baker tells about learning, at the age of five, that his father had just died. He wrote:

> "That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted. After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me deeply in pain." [Growing Up, p. 61-62]

There it is again - the connection between love and suffering. The traditional explanation falls apart for Job when it is his family, his life, his love. C. S. Lewis can deliver learned

lectures on pain and suffering until he loves and the person he loves dies and then even he is speechless. Russell Baker, with amazing candor, confesses that to love deeply is to know the reality of suffering.

There are, of course, ways to talk about it. Some suffering occurs because of human error, misjudgment, wrongdoing, sin - if you will. Put enough carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and you will burn a hole in the ozone, the whole place will warm up and people will die of skin cancer. Breathe enough smoke and tar and nicotine into your system and there is a very good chance that you will become very sick and die. Everybody knows that.

So some suffering occurs because of human error and greed and sin. But some just happens because we are part of creation. Some suffering happens because we are free.

God has created us to live in peace and justice and love. But, the theologians teach, if we are free to love and seek peace, we are also free not to love and to make war. God can't predetermine it, or stack the deck, or even intervene in the process without violating our freedom our humanness.

Parents understand that. You don't want your child to suffer ever. You want to do everything possible to protect your child from random accidents, sadness, tragedy.

But there comes a day when your child must walk out of the house and go to school, or cross a street alone, or drive the car. And on those days your love, because it is love, is willing to risk tragedy for the sake of your child's freedom and growth and humanness.

Does God cause suffering? Of course not! The notion is appalling. Does God allow suffering? In the same way that your mother and father exposed you to the risk of accidental tragedy when you first rode a bicycle or drove the family car, yes.

Does God care? Did your parents care? Of course. Madeleine L'Engle said somewhere that parents are only ever as happy as their least happy child. Of course God cares - that's the point. God cares enough to love us into existence, to love us into life, to give us freedom to love life deeply and passionately. God cares enough to stand with us and over us as we live our lives, good days and bad, joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies in the same way that the love of a good parent is always with the child.

In fact, the paradox, the mystery of the cross, is that God suffers too.

Frederick Buechner wrote beautifully about God granting us freedom and not intervening in our lives to protect us from tragedy because that would mean violating our freedom. [The Faces of Jesus, p. 54 ff.] And then for him, too, that neat abstraction became a terrible reality as his beloved daughter became gravely ill. Anorexia - and Buechner more than anything wanted to protect her and make her well. In his book, Telling Secrets, he writes:

> "The only way I knew to be a father was to take care of her, to move heaven and earth to make her well. The psychiatrists we consulted told me I couldn't cure her. The best I could do as her father was to stand back and give her (that) freedom even at the risk of her using it to choose for death instead of life." [p. 26-27]

And so that is what he did, loved her enough not to violate her freedom, and suffered with her and for her.

St. Paul was right.

It's foolishness finally and weakness. The foolishness and weakness of God who loves so much as to become vulnerable for us, loves us enough to be subject to the same random suffering, the same unpredictable and unjust tragedy, as anyone of us. God being God, didn't have to do that, didn't have to offer up a son and die in the way only a parent dies at the death of a beloved child.

It's a foolishness which turns out to be better than our best wisdom, St. Paul wrote, as he too, exhausted all the theological ways to describe it.

And C. S. Lewis, just three years before he died, wrote so beautifully in a way I now conclude was not only about himself - but about God.

> "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you will give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully with luxuries, avoid all entanglements, lock it up in the coffin of your selfishness... it will not be broken: it will become unbreakable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be safe from all the dangers of love is Hell." [The Four Loves, C. S. Lewis, p. 111-112]

The foolishness of God: a cross, suffering and death, the promise of love, the gift of love, the power of love.

On the day I got up early to prepare this sermon I headed out at noon, drove route 65 to Lafayette, Indiana, for the funeral of a friend. He had retired early, was as happy as he knew how to be, his sons raised and on their own, mortgage paid, healthy grandchildren. Six weeks ago he was doing what he loved most in the world - next to God and his family - standing knee deep in the Gulf fishing. Monday he died.

No one can explain it. The physicians can say what they know. We can all gather around his wife and family - as we did - ultimately without words to say, except for these:

> God did not will his death. God's heart breaks along with our hearts. God has loved deeply and felt deeply the pain and the grief which come to each of us. God knows. God cares.

And the cross which stands for the anguish of God and also for the relentless presence of innocent suffering and injustice in life, also stands for something else - namely God's love and the promise that no matter what happens to us, in that love, we are ultimately, finally, safe and free.

Those are the best words we can say... or these:

> "Where is the one who is wise?... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?... Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God." [1 Corinthians 1:20-24]